HOWARD'S END

WHY A LEADING JEWISH STUDIES SCHOLAR GAVE UP HIS ACADEMIC CAREER

A FEW DAYS BEFORE HOWARD EILBERG-SCHWARTZ was scheduled to launch the Jewish studies program at San Francisco State University, he was persuaded by the school's director of human resources to attend an all-day seminar for select faculty members, students, and local Jewish leaders. It was to be Eilberg-Schwartz's introduction to the school's Jewish community, and, understandably, he was nervous. As part of the program, participants were asked to respond to a series of provocative questions by moving to a designated area of the room. When the question "How central is Israel to Judaism?" was posed, he self-consciously took a spot among the smallish group that answered "Not terribly." And when attendees were asked if they thought the statement "Zionism is racism" was anti-Semitic, Eilberg-Schwartz—who sees the movement to create a Jewish state within the broad context of European colonialism—shuffled over toward the corner designated "No." This time he stood virtually alone.

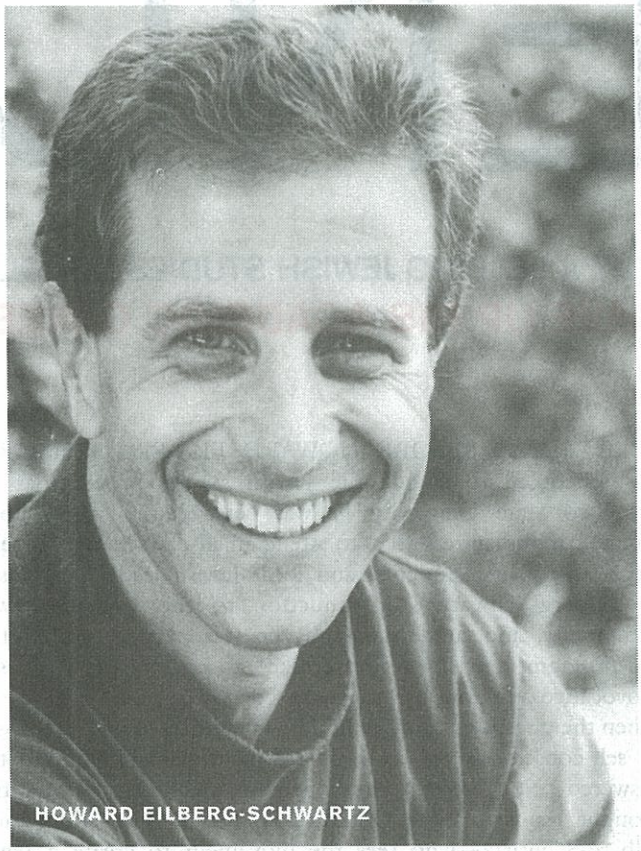
"I remember people coming up to me afterwards and saying how disappointed they were that I had been named head of Jewish studies," Eilberg-Schwartz recalls now, more than two years later. "That's when I knew I wasn't in sync with the local Jewish community. From that moment on, I was branded."

Indeed, that fateful morning in the summer of 1994 would set the stage for a year of conflict between Eilberg-Schwartz and the local Jewish community, one that would culminate in his precipitous departure from the university—and academia altogether—in the fall of 1995. The forty-one-year-old ex-scholar says that the pressure to defend Israel and blunt his critique of Jewish traditions made him feel more like a Hillel rabbi than a professor. For their part, critics on and off the campus accuse Eilberg-Schwartz of being insensitive to the unusual environment at San Francisco State, a deeply politicized school with a vocal

BY **JONATHAN MAHLER**

Palestinian student population. To back up their case, they point out that the professor invited a Palestinian activist with an alleged history of making anti-Semitic remarks to speak in his classroom.

At the heart of this disagreement is a quarrel over the role of Jewish studies in the academy and the prerequisites for leadership of such programs. It's a debate that was echoed last summer on the campus of Queens College, when a non-Jewish professor was named head of the Jewish studies program there. The appointment led to objections (as well as two resignations) from Jewish professors who argued that the director should be a "role model" to Jewish students—an impossible task, they contended, for someone outside the faith. For Eilberg-Schwartz, whose scholarly investigations into Jewish identity had only made him more skeptical of many community beliefs, the San Francisco State community's demand that he transform himself from rebel to role model proved too much to bear. But the tale of Eilberg-Schwartz is about more than campus politics. It's also a lesson in the difficulty of reconciling two often contradictory impulses within the multicultural academy: the desire to reach out to other communities while also strengthening feelings of identity among one's own people. Eilberg-Schwartz ultimately felt there was no way he could walk this tightrope—and so he simply cut the cord.



HOWARD EILBERG-SCHWARTZ

THOUGH HE HAD MISGIVINGS ABOUT ACADEMIA, EILBERG-SCHWARTZ HAD HIGH HOPES FOR SAN FRANCISCO STATE. "I SAW MYSELF AS A BRIDGE BUILDER."

THE long-simmering ethnic tensions at San Francisco State bubbled to the surface only weeks after Eilberg-Schwartz agreed to become the school's first director of Jewish studies. It was the spring of 1994 and the student government had just commissioned a local artist to paint a mural of Malcolm X on the wall of the student union. When the ten-foot-by-ten-foot work was unveiled in May, it was greeted with gasps from many onlookers: The border was decorated with Stars of David, dollar signs, skull-and-crossbones symbols, and the phrase AFRICAN BLOOD.

To those concerned about the quality of life for Jewish students at San Francisco State, the incident came as no surprise: Local Jewish leaders had chronicled a number of disturbing activities on campus dating back to the mid-Eighties. In April 1992, for example, Palestinian students protested a Hillel gathering memorializing the Holocaust by distributing fliers equating Israeli treatment of Palestinians with Nazi treatment of Jews. And in 1993 student-association leader Hatem Bazian led a yearlong attack on "Zionist forces," accusing the school's Hillel chapter of spying on Palestinian students, like himself, for Israeli intelligence. At one point, Bazian and a band of twenty-five students stormed the offices of the school newspaper, the *Golden Gater,* after its editors refused to publish an unsubstantiated quote from a student claiming that he had been a campus spy for the Anti-Defamation League. "The mural was just one more chapter in an assault on Jewish students at San Francisco State," said Doug Kahn, director of San Francisco's Jewish Community Relations Council (JCRC).

The JCRC, along with a handful of local Jewish agencies, played a key role in the creation of the school's Jewish studies program; as a result of cuts in state support for education in California, the administration had approved the launch of the program only on the condition that its entire annual budget of some $100,000 eventually be covered by community dollars. Naturally, the prospective donors had their hopes for the program—in particular, that it would provide a dose of pride to the school's embattled Jewish student body. As Kahn puts it, "For those of us who had seen this recurring pattern of anti-Semitism, the decision to start a program of Jewish studies meant the potential leveling of the playing field." This attitude, admirable though it may seem, generated tensions almost immediately once Eilberg-Schwartz was chosen to lead the fledgling program. Community leaders suggested that, at least in public, Eilberg-Schwartz emphasize the distinctiveness of Jewish traditions—an approach that ran counter to the professor's scholarly instincts. "Whenever I was in a situation where I was expected to make a case that Judaism was unique, everything in me wanted to resist that

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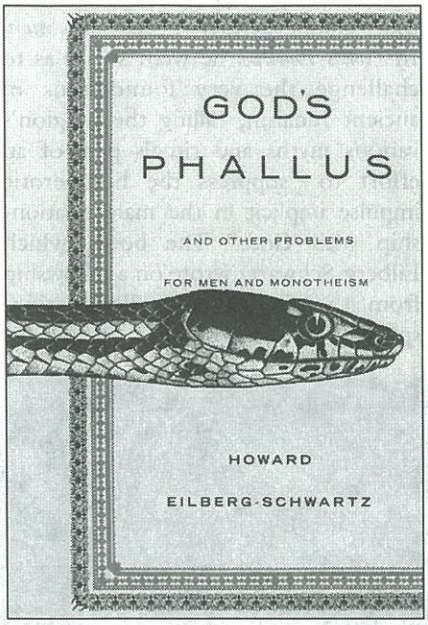
politics," he says. "I saw myself as a bridge builder."

That's certainly how things began. One of his first moves as program chair was to organize a joint Jewish studies–Black studies symposium attacking *The Bell Curve*. The colloquium, which drew a crowd of five hundred students, won Eilberg-Schwartz numerous admirers in the school's African-American community and seemed to bode well for his plans for racial reconciliation.

Finding common ground between the school's Jewish and Palestinian populations, however, proved decidedly more challenging. Many of Eilberg-Schwartz's forays into this area were viewed with suspicion by local Jewish leaders and activists, who felt he was only legitimizing anti-Semitic viewpoints that were cleverly couched in political statements about Israel's right to exist. In an editorial in the campus newspaper, Eilberg-Schwartz argued that "Jews have a right to a state they can depend upon to care about Jews," and then went on to say that "I am among the first to criticize the Israeli government's policies toward Palestinians." For some conservative critics, this sounded like a rhetorical cave-in—or at the very least, an ill-advised move at a school where an outspoken candidate for student-body president, Troy Buckner-Nkrumah, had taken to making statements like "the only good Zionist is a dead Zionist." These same critics took Eilberg-Schwartz to task for refusing to co-sponsor a performance of *Naomi,* an Israeli play about a Bedouin woman who leaves her tribe to avoid circumcision and winds up at an Israeli university.

Things came to a head in the spring, after Eilberg-Schwartz invited Hatem Bazian, the controversial former student-body president, to speak to his class in modern Judaism. (Bazian had moved on by then to graduate school in Near Eastern studies at UC-Berkeley.) At the lecture, Bazian adopted a more moderate tone than in his undergraduate years: In front of an audience of twenty-five students, he related his version of the history of the Palestinian people—who they are and how they came to be displaced by the creation of the state of Israel. The



EILBERG-SCHWARTZ'S WORK "HAS A COMBATIVE QUALITY," SAYS DAVID BIALE. "IT'S NO SURPRISE THAT SUCH A PERSON MIGHT FIND HIMSELF IN AN UNTENABLE SITUATION WHEN HE HAS TO DEFEND THE JEWISH COMMUNITY."

politically charged message of Bazian's presentation notwithstanding, Eilberg-Schwartz remembers his guest speaker as restrained. "It was a very calm, smooth narrative," he recalls, noting that many of the students present had never before heard the Palestinian perspective on the Israeli conflict. "He wasn't provocative, as he purportedly can be."

But to Eilberg-Schwartz's critics, the issue wasn't what Bazian had said; it was the very fact that Eilberg-Schwartz had ignored the advice of several of his colleagues and opted to give Bazian a platform. "This was a person who was identified as an extreme anti-Semite," says Marvin Silverman, a professor of education at San Francisco State. Silverman, who served as chairman of the search committee that hired Eilberg-Schwartz, adds: "There were a number of people who thought it was a mistake, but he went ahead and did it anyway." (Outside the classroom, Bazian continued to infuriate local Jewish leaders. Last March, he participated in a rally at Berkeley in which demonstrators dressed in military garb and stomped on an Israeli flag. The rally took place weeks after the Hamas suicide bombings in Tel Aviv and Jerusalem.)

This frustration with Eilberg-Schwartz was shared by the JCRC's Kahn. "Hatem Bazian was more responsible than any other student on campus for trying to make life miserable for Jewish students," he adds. "To give him that kind of status, when he had consistently verbally attacked Jewish students on campus, seemed to us an ill-advised move."

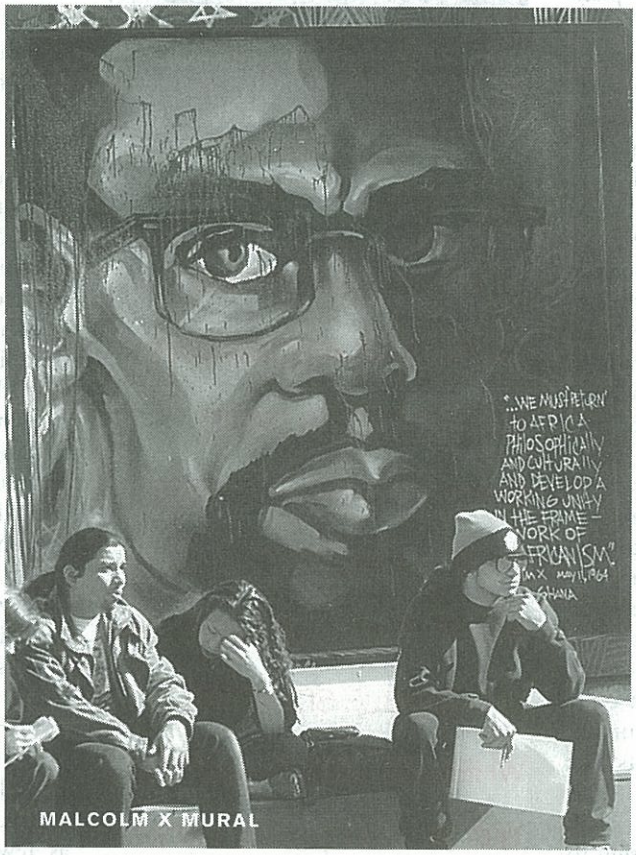
Other Jewish leaders argued that opening lines of communication, even with figures like Bazian, was part of the process of rapprochement—a process that the Jewish community was not genuinely interested in. "Howie was doing wonderful work, which I observed up close, at creating contact and dialogue between Jews and other groups on campus, including feminists, blacks, Palestinians, and gays and lesbians," says Daniel Boyarin, a professor of Talmudic culture at Berkeley. "Various people in the surrounding Jewish community, as well as Jewish students, weren't interested in the complex, painful business of reaching across the lines and talking to enemies."

Only weeks after the Hatem Bazian incident, Eilberg-Schwartz tried to mend some fences. "I had got a lot of heat over this and I was worried that the program was in danger financially," he says. In March 1995, Eilberg-Schwartz convened a closed-door meeting with a handful of local Jewish community leaders and San Francisco State faculty members. In an attempt to show that his own perspective was within acceptable bounds, academically speaking, he invited David Biale and Steven Zipperstein, the directors of Jewish studies at the Graduate Theological Union and at Stanford,

impulse," he says. "I wanted to understand Judaism in a larger context and identify Judaism with broader impulses. The whole thrust of my scholarship was that you can't say Judaism is unique."

AT THE TIME of his appointment, Eilberg-Schwartz was already known as an enfant terrible in mainstream Jewish circles. Starting with his early graduate work at the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York, Eilberg-Schwartz had chosen to study Judaism through the lens of an anthropologist, removing the Scriptures from their sacred contexts and placing them in cultural ones. For his senior sermon, a public address that all graduating seniors are required to give, he subjected to anthropological scrutiny the Jewish taboo against physical contact with menstruating women. One of his professors insisted that he change his topic, or fail out of rabbinical school. Eilberg-Schwartz stood his ground. They eventually reached a compromise: The subject was okay, but the word "semen" had to be deleted. Eilberg-Schwartz was ordained.

In his first major book, *The Savage in Judaism* (Indiana, 1990), Eilberg-Schwartz—with a lengthy nod to Claude Lévi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind*—set out to undermine the distinctions that had been drawn between Judaism and the "savage" religions of primitive societies. His next book, *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Beacon, 1994), was deemed even more controversial, with its suggestion that Jews infuse their relationship with God with sexuality and eroticism in order to reenergize their religious lives. For years, feminist scholars had been examining the problems that worshiping a male God creates for women, but Eilberg-Schwartz broke new ground by exploring the dilemmas that God's gender poses for *men*. In *God's Phallus,* he went so far as to challenge the very foundations of ancient Judaism, calling the religion's various myths and rituals part of an effort to "suppress the homoerotic impulse implicit in the male relationship with God." The book, which Eilberg-Schwartz wrote on a fellowship from the Guggenheim Foundation, sparked a heated debate among his colleagues at Stanford, where he was denied tenure in the spring of 1994.



THE LONG-SIMMERING ETHNIC TENSIONS AT SAN FRANCISCO STATE BUBBLED TO THE SURFACE ONLY WEEKS AFTER EILBERG-SCHWARTZ ARRIVED.

Despite that setback, Eilberg-Schwartz continued to pen provocative scholarship—even writing an essay condemning circumcision in *Tikkun* magazine. In that piece he argued that the act of cutting the male foreskin makes "male wounding" central to the covenant between man and God—a covenant that he believes would be more constructively symbolized by a "nurturing act," such as feeding. "His work has a combative quality vis-à-vis conventional opinion," offers David Biale, director of Jewish studies at Berkeley's Graduate Theological Union. "It's no surprise that a person who takes those kinds of views might find himself in an untenable situation when he has to defend the Jewish community."

YET paradoxically, an unconventional scholar like Eilberg-Schwartz stood the best chance of narrowing the widening gulf between San Francisco State's wounded Jewish population and its Palestinian and African-American students. After all, a more conservative figure might have galvanized Jewish students but only further polarized the campus. It was that realization, coupled with his reputation as a leading scholar, that made Eilberg-Schwartz seem an ideal candidate to the embattled university. "We were all very enthusiastic about him," remembers Mary Felstiner, a member of the hiring committee that tapped Eilberg-Schwartz to construct a small interdisciplinary program featuring innovative courses such as "Postmodernism and the Jewish Tradition" and "Jewish Women." "I thought he was daring and very personable," notes Felstiner, who says she was particularly excited about Eilberg-Schwartz's arrival because she shared his interest in making feminism and gender studies more central to the school's curriculum. "I saw Howie as a very helpful influence for starting us out with a really venturesome program."

Though he had misgivings about San Francisco State, and about academia in general after his tenure troubles at Stanford, Eilberg-Schwartz, too, had high hopes. "My politics seemed to dovetail with the campus

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respectively, to the meeting. Both rallied to his defense. Biale wrote off the Bazian invitation as an error committed out of naïveté, not malicious intent, and emphasized that the politics of Israel were not relevant to Eilberg-Schwartz's principal area of expertise—namely, defining the Jewish place in a multicultural society.

But several community leaders, including Doug Kahn, were less forgiving. They chided Eilberg-Schwartz for agreeing, in a discussion on the quad with a group of Palestinian students, that Zionism should be viewed within the context of Western imperialism. To them, the Bazian flap was representative of Eilberg-Schwartz's more general insensitivity to the tense atmosphere on campus. Because negative feelings toward the Jewish community were so prevalent on campus, they argued, it was the director's responsibility to try to balance things out. Still, his critics insist that they never violated his academic freedom or censored his political views; they were simply raising questions about his judgment. "Eilberg-Schwartz's sin was not in espousing radical positions," Marvin Silverman explains. "His sin was in showing extremely poor judgment in how he intertwined those positions and his professional duties as head of the program."

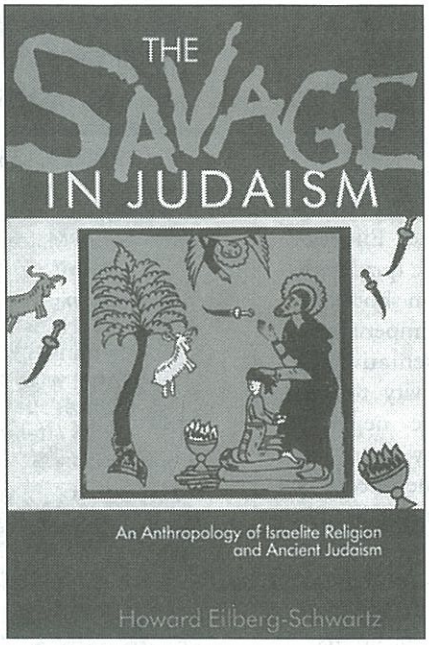
As for Eilberg-Schwartz, he responded that he felt he was being unfairly asked to enact "Jewishness" in a specific way, a problem that some consider dangerously widespread in Jewish studies programs, which are often built around endowed chairs set up by individual donors. "To the extent that the Jewish establishment sees the Jewish studies professoriat as an academic arm of their political activity, they are ultimately going to destroy Jewish studies as a viable source for Jewish renewal," warns Daniel Boyarin, a staunch anti-Zionist who maintains that subversive scholarship can play an important role in revitalizing Jewish life.

In fact, San Francisco State isn't the first school to experience this type of turmoil. Lawrence Baron, director of the Lipinsky Institute for Judaic Studies at San Diego State University, got himself into hot water when he assumed control of that program back in 1988. "There's an expectation when these programs get created.... I'm not sure universities always do their best to tell people up front that these are academic, not advocacy, programs," says Baron, who was roundly criticized for bringing a Christian scholar to campus to lecture on the Jewishness of Jesus. "It's those kinds of things that get you in trouble, and you just have to weather it."

BUT Eilberg-Schwartz chose not to weather it. When a local community leader, Ernest Weiner of the American Jewish Committee, asked him point-blank at the March meeting if he felt that the state of Israel should exist, Eilberg-Schwartz decided that it was time to pack it in. "It was clear that my political views were an issue in support for the program," offers

Eilberg-Schwartz, who says that his job "no longer felt like an academic position." But he didn't announce his decision to leave at the meeting. Rather, he quietly began looking for another job—without notifying San Francisco State's administration. Only after the summer, in October, did he give notice. He would continue teaching his classes for the remainder of the semester, he said, but was dropping all of his administrative duties, effective in two weeks.

Eilberg-Schwartz's hasty departure from San Francisco State threw the school's nascent Jewish studies program into a state of chaos. Colleagues say that he offered the school no help in dealing with the transition and did not even return phone calls from fellow faculty members. Eilberg-Schwartz disputes this charge, countering that he drafted a state-of-the-program report and did everything in his power to smooth the transition. In any case, professors who had strongly defended his right to express controversial positions now turned against him. "I was furious at the way he left," says Felstiner.



So what happened? As Eilberg-Schwartz sees it, his growing ambivalence about his own Jewishness simply crystallized—albeit quickly—at San Francisco State. Or, in the words of David Biale, "his exploration just self-destructed. In a sense, Howie and others like him use Jewish studies as a way of interrogating their own identities. We—I can include myself in this—don't do disinterested scholarship."

In the beginning, Eilberg Schwartz's study of Judaism grew out of his desire to make sense of the religion that he has labeled "this alien thing that is my inheritance." Yet ironically, his attempts to decode the meaning of religious practices only further alienated him from that inheritance. "I was moving away from the community," he recalls. "Traditional forms of Jewish identity no longer made sense to me. I found the Jewish community too ethnocentric, too focused on its own victimization." This feeling of disenchantment, which Eilberg-Schwartz attributes in large part to what he perceives as the community's narrow vision of Judaism and Jewish scholarship, has stuck with him; he says he no longer belongs to a synagogue or contributes to Jewish charities.

WHAT DOES an ex-scholar of Judaism do for a second career? This one, like many other Bay Area former academics, is now writing

technical manuals for a computer software company in Silicon Valley. "I kind of view myself as a renegade rabbi," he says with a chuckle.

Yet while Eilberg-Schwartz may have made an emphatic break with the world of academia and the Jewish community for the time being, his place in the field of Jewish studies seems assured, at least at the moment. "His stock is high in the scholarly field right now," says Shaye Cohen, a professor of Judaic studies at Brown University.

Indeed, Eilberg-Schwartz's approach to studying Talmudic texts and rituals is emerging as a popular method of inquiry in Jewish studies. Examining how the body serves as the site for the symbolic language of Judaism, tracing how rituals become the basis for Jewish culture, understanding how these rituals inform social relations—these lines of scholarly attack, once considered anathema to students of the Bible, are now being embraced. According to Sander Gilman, a professor of German and Jewish studies at the University of Chicago, Eilberg-Schwartz is an avant-garde—not fringe—scholar. "My sense is that Eilberg-Schwartz got caught in a paradigm shift in terms of what is acceptable and unacceptable when you start to constitute a new field," Gilman says.

As for Jewish studies at San Francisco State, the program appears to have withstood the crisis precipitated by Eilberg-Schwartz's unexpected resignation. A new director, Laurie Zoloth-Dorfman, has been appointed (although without tenure). An Orthodox Jewish feminist with a long history of Jewish activism—not to mention impeccable Zionist credentials—Zoloth-Dorfman fits in more snugly with the San Francisco State environment. Moreover, she does not begrudge the community its desire for a voice in the direction of the program. "The role of chair sometimes involves a significant community relational component," Zoloth-Dorfman allows. "While open to all, scholarship has a responsibility to the community." She preaches a "scholarship of engagement," in which academics do their best to tailor their programs and research to the needs of their local environment.

This past fall, Zoloth-Dorfman and an African-American journalism professor taught a course in Black–Jewish relations. During the semester, they brought to campus spokesmen from the Nation of Islam, representatives from the Anti-Defamation League, and Avi Weiss, a right-wing Orthodox rabbi from Manhattan. Clearly, Eilberg-Schwartz's activism hasn't been entirely forgotten. But there are differences. The walls of the Jewish studies office, bare during Eilberg-Schwartz's tour of duty, are now adorned with objects, including a kitschy clock with Hebrew numerals and a placard proclaiming the innocence of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg. In fact, the only physical reminder of the program's recent troubles is a cardboard box shoved up against the back wall. The box overflows with manila folders, and scrawled across its side is the label: HOWARD'S THINGS.

Jonathan Mahler is the managing editor of the *Forward* newspaper in New York.

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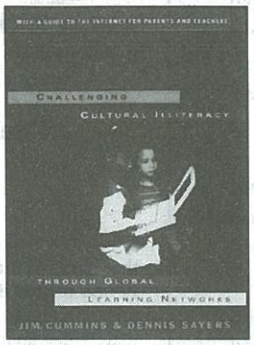

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